DISCUSSION PAPER

TRANSIT SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

IN THE

VANCOUVER REGIONAL TRANSIT SERVICE AREA

BC TRANSIT
SEPTEMBER, 1992

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TRANSIT SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE VANCOUVER REGIONAL TRANSIT SERVICE AREA

INTRODUCTION

BC Transit provides a range of transportation services for people with disabilities - handyDART, accessible buses, Skytrain, Seabus, and Taxi Savers. The purpose of the public meetings to be held in September and October, 1992, is to get feedback from people with disabilities and others about these services and how they might be better tailored to meet all passengers' needs.

This discussion paper addresses three broad topics: an overview of current services, trends and issues affecting these services, and policies and plans for the future. It is intended to stimulate your thinking and generate a range of ideas about future directions.

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT SERVICES

BC Transit is a provincial Crown corporation with a mandate to plan, administer, operate, and fund transit services in communities throughout British Columbia. BC Transit is controlled by a Board of Directors which reports to the Minister responsible for transit. There are two offices and two staff groups - one in Vancouver and the other in Victoria. The Victoria office is responsible for transit services in Victoria and in all other small communities throughout the province.

The Vancouver office staff administers transit services in the Vancouver region - buses, handyDART, West Vancouver buses, Skytrain, and Seabus. The Vancouver Regional Transit Commission, six regional mayors plus one City of Vancouver councillor who are appointed by the provincial government, decides on service levels, fares, and budgets. Most importantly, the Commission determines how its share of the transit deficit is to be raised from several tax sources. The Commission's recommendations for service levels and funding must be ratified by the Board of Directors and are subject to final approval by Treasury Board and Cabinet.

The Vancouver Regional Transit System serves an urban region which includes 20 municipalities and 1800 square kilometres. The Vancouver region is the largest urban community in British Columbia and has the largest transit service area in Canada. In recent years it has been extended east to include Langley, Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows.

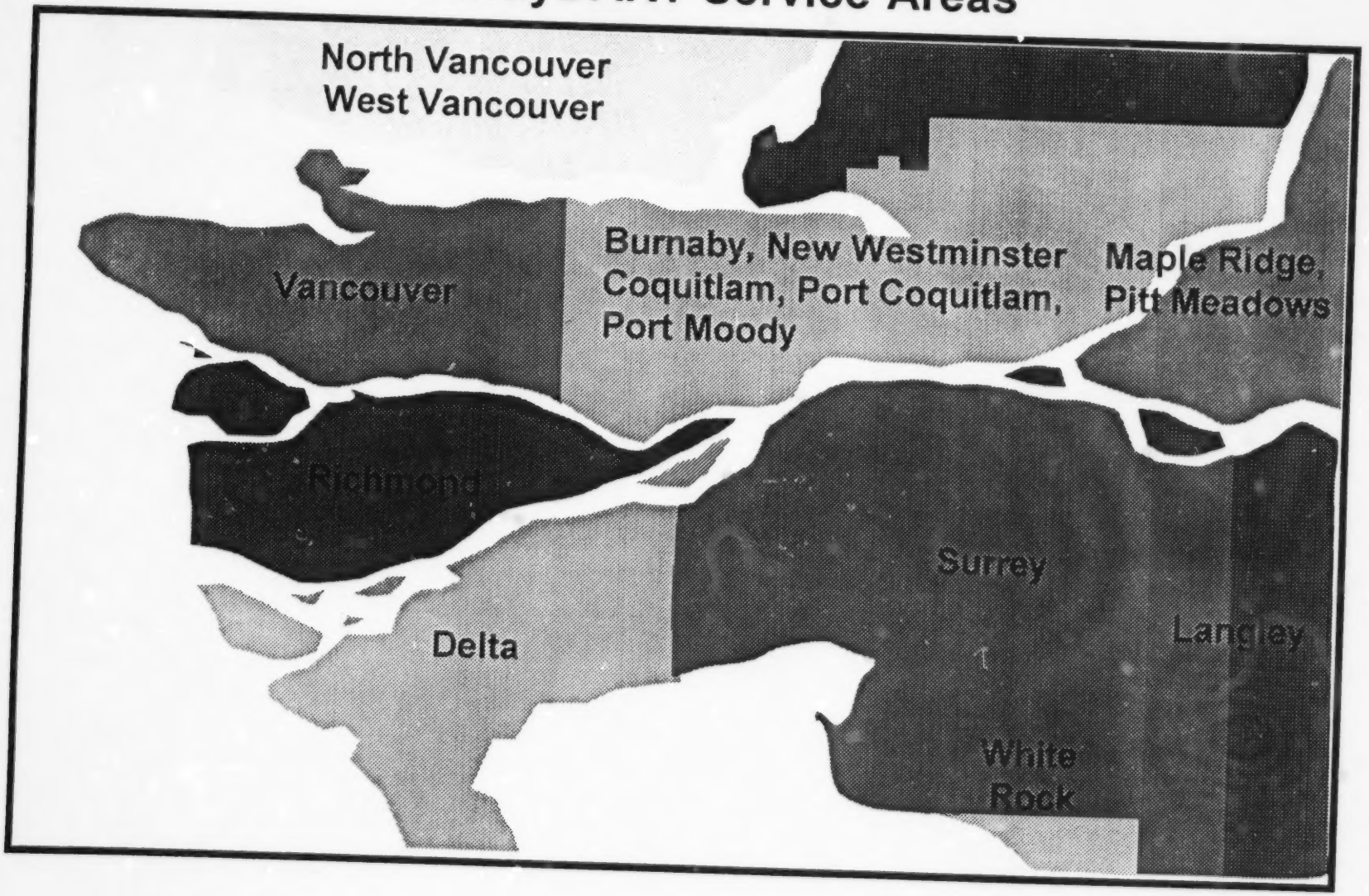
The regional transit system consists of diesel buses and trolley coaches, SkyTrain, and Seabus. SkyTrain is a 24-kilometre automated and grade-separated light rapid transit line which extends southeast from central Vancouver to Surrey. Seabus is a 400-passenger catamaran ferry which traverses Burrard Inlet between Vancouver and North Vancouver. There is also a parallel transit service --handyDART-- for people with disabilities.

In the last few years, there has been a profound change in the way BC Transit views transit services for people with disabilities. There is a concerted effort to move from the "separate but equal" approach represented by handyDART to fully integrated transit systems. The Vancouver Regional Transit Commission, which shares responsibility with BC Transit, was the first transit organization in Canada to adopt a policy of full transit accessibility.

In 1980, BC Transit decided that a parallel transit service was the most efficient and cost-effective method of providing transportation for people with disabilities. Local handyDART systems were subsequently established in Vancouver, Victoria, and many other communities. These are operated by community-based organizations under annual service contracts with BC Transit. In the Vancouver region, there are eight local community contractors, most of which are non-profit organizations. Proposals for service are sought from interested parties every five years, and contracts are awarded on the basis of expertise, quality of service, and cost-effectiveness.

handyDART services are community based in order to better serve individuals living in each part of the service area. Eligible residents register for service at their local handyDART office and then telephone in advance when they wish to travel. As there are eight operators, booking policies and hours of operation can vary somewhat depending on where you live, but all regional operators conform to service levels and policies established by BC Transit. A user group, the Vancouver Region Custom Transit Advisory Committee, assists BC Transit staff to monitor and improve handyDART services.

Vancouver Regional Transit System
handyDART Service Areas

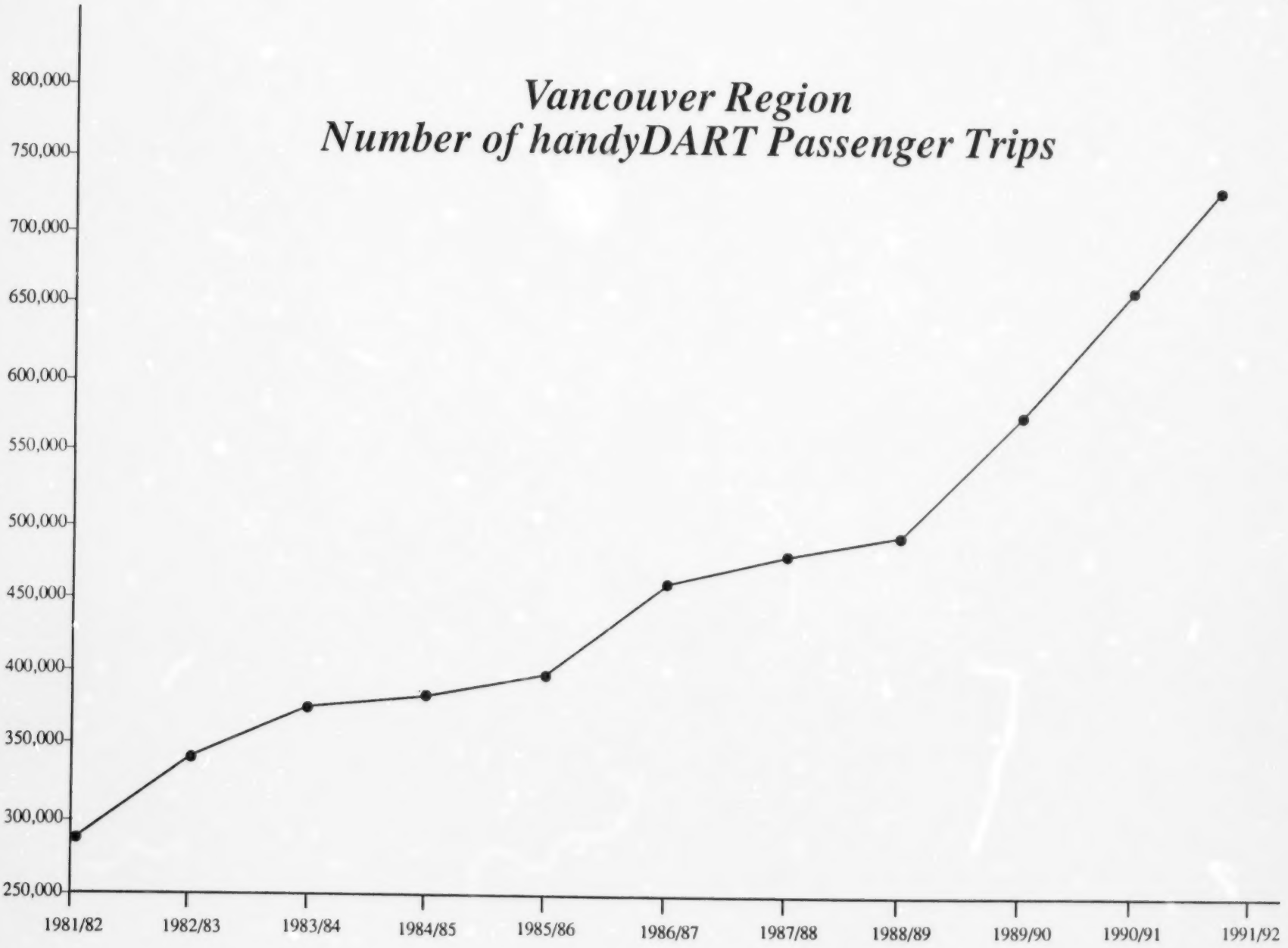


handyDART provides a door-to-door shared ride service using small vans that accommodate people who are unable to use regular buses. These vehicles are built to BC Transit specifications and are designed to accommodate the needs of passengers with a broad range of disabilities. Vehicle styles include lift-equipped vans with raised rooves, passenger vans with no lifts, mini-buses that can carry several wheelchairs and up to 18 ambulatory passengers, and a new ELF vehicle. The ELF is an Extra Low Floor bus with a floor that is only 12 inches above road level. A ramp is used to increase the ease of entry to the vehicle at the front and rear doors. One ELF vehicle has been purchased for testing in the region and will go into regular service in the City of Vancouver in October, 1992.

The regional handyDART service has been expanded significantly each year in response to ever-increasing demands for service. During 1991/92, about 26,000 hours of handyDART service were provided each month by a regional fleet of 160 vehicles. Annual ridership was 730,000 passengers with disabilities at a total cost of $11,000,000. The average cost per passenger trip was $15. This is a substantial increase from the first full year of operation in 1981/82 when 287,000 passenger trips were taken in 76 vehicles at a cost of $3 million. Service levels have been increased by 10 to 15 percent each year for the past three years.

Skytrain, which began revenue service in 1986, was designed and built to be fully accessible for people in wheelchairs and for people with visual impairments. Each four-car train contains two designated wheelchair parking spots. There are also special features for people with visual impairments such as yellow tactile striping which is cane-detectable to alert people when they near the edge of the platform. There are elevators at all elevated or underground stations (except at Granville Station) and a maximum gap between station platforms and Skytrain cars of 50 mm (2 inches) in width and 25 mm (1 inch) in height. BC Transit has plans to install an elevator at Granville Station when the property at the southwest corner of Dunsmuir and Seymour Streets is redeveloped.

SeaBus has also been fully accessible since 1986, following installation of an elevator at Waterfront Station, the downtown terminus of Skytrain. Passengers in wheelchairs can wheel directly onto Seabus and there are several areas inside each vessel designated as suitable for parking wheelchairs.


Vancouver Region
Number of handyDART Passenger Trips
800,000
750,000
700,000
650,000
600,000
550,000
500,000
450,000
400,000
350,000
300,000
250,000
1981/82
1982/83
1983/84
1984/85
1985/86
1986/87
1987/88
1988/89
1989/90
1990/91
1991/92

In 1990, accessible buses were introduced in the Vancouver region. This was as a result of decisions made by the Vancouver Regional Transit Commission and the Board of Directors of BC Transit. In 1988, COMPACT (Committee to Promote Accessible Conventional Transit), a group of persons with disabilities, lobbied the Vancouver Regional Transit Commission to endorse an accessible conventional transit service. Subsequently, the Board of Directors of BC Transit appointed a three-person Task Force under the chairmanship of the Mayor of the City of Vancouver to examine and report on all aspects of transit services for persons with disabilities.

Of major interest to the Task Force was the feasibility of introducing lift-equipped buses in the Vancouver region. A staff report entitled "Proposed Implementation Strategy for Lift-Equipped Buses in the Vancouver Region" examined this concept and concluded that a 17-year implementation period would be needed to make the regional bus fleet fully accessible. A second report entitled "Custom Transit Policy Review" looked at other methods of improving transit services for people with disabilities. These included expanded handyDART service, supplementary taxi service, dedicated accessible fixed-route service (i.e. service routes), and taxi scrip.

The Task Force held public meetings in the spring of 1989 so that interested parties could express their views on all aspects of urban transit for people with disabilities. There was unanimous agreement that the highest priority should be given to an accessible bus program and acceptance that acquisition of an accessible fleet would require nearly 20 years.

Following these public meetings and a review of all submissions, the Task Force submitted its recommendations to the Board of Directors, and the Board subsequently adopted a new policy in June, 1989, which led to the first 86 accessible buses going into service on 22 routes in 1990.

COMPACT played a central role in the decision to provide accessible service, and COMPACT members were invited to join with BC Transit staff to form an Accessible Bus Implementation Committee. This Committee included BC Transit staff members from planning, scheduling, operations, maintenance, training, and marketing, as well as representatives from the bus drivers' union. This Committee met on a regular basis during 1989 and 1990 and helped to ensure that there was a successful launch of accessible bus service.

The Accessible Bus Committee continues to meet bi-monthly to monitor the continuing implementation of accessible bus service and to provide BC Transit with comments and suggestions from users.

The decision to make buses accessible was an important one as it allows people with disabilities to use the same public transit services that are available to everyone else. COMPACT and people who made presentations at the public meetings saw this as a "right" which should not be denied to people with disabilities. Public transit can also provide people with disabilities the opportunity to make spontaneous trips instead of having to book handyDART several days in advance. Public transit has greater capacity to accommodate trip requests and it is a cost effective alternative to handyDART. BC Transit is fully committed to the accessible bus program and wishes to encourage greater use of the new buses by people with disabilities.

The first accessible routes went into service in 1990. In 1991, an additional 135 buses were added on another 30 routes, which included the Community Link service in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows. Another 56 accessible vehicles have been purchased this year and an additional 15 routes will begin to offer accessible service in October, 1992.

Because several of these new routes will be in Surrey, BC Transit is considering the installation of a second elevator at the Scott Road SkyTrain Station. Although such an installation is feasible, the earliest it could be built and in operation is the summer of 1993. A taxi shuttle service has been proposed as an interim measure by BC Transit and agreed to by COMPACT. This free service using accessible taxis will be available to HandyPass holders who wish to move between the bus loop at the west end of the station and the existing SkyTrain elevator at the east end.

The diesel bus fleet is expected to be made fully accessible over the next eight years; the trolley fleet will be replaced with lift-equipped trolley buses by the year 2006. Three wheeled scooters were not accepted on the accessible buses during the first year of operation. During that period, an improved securement system was devised and installed. Passengers on scooters were accepted in 1991, and people who use walkers and crutches or others who have difficulty climbing stairs are also being encouraged to use the lifts.

A wheelchair lift costs approximately $18,000 when it is installed on a new bus at the factory. To date, $5 million has been spent to equip 278 regional transit buses with lifts.

Wheelchair accessible taxis are used in the Vancouver region in two programs. The supplementary taxi service allows handyDART operators to expend a designated budget amount on taxis when this is a cost-effective alternative to using a handyDART vehicle. The Taxi Saver program provides a direct user subsidy for the cost of cab fares for people who have a HandyPass and prefer to use taxis.

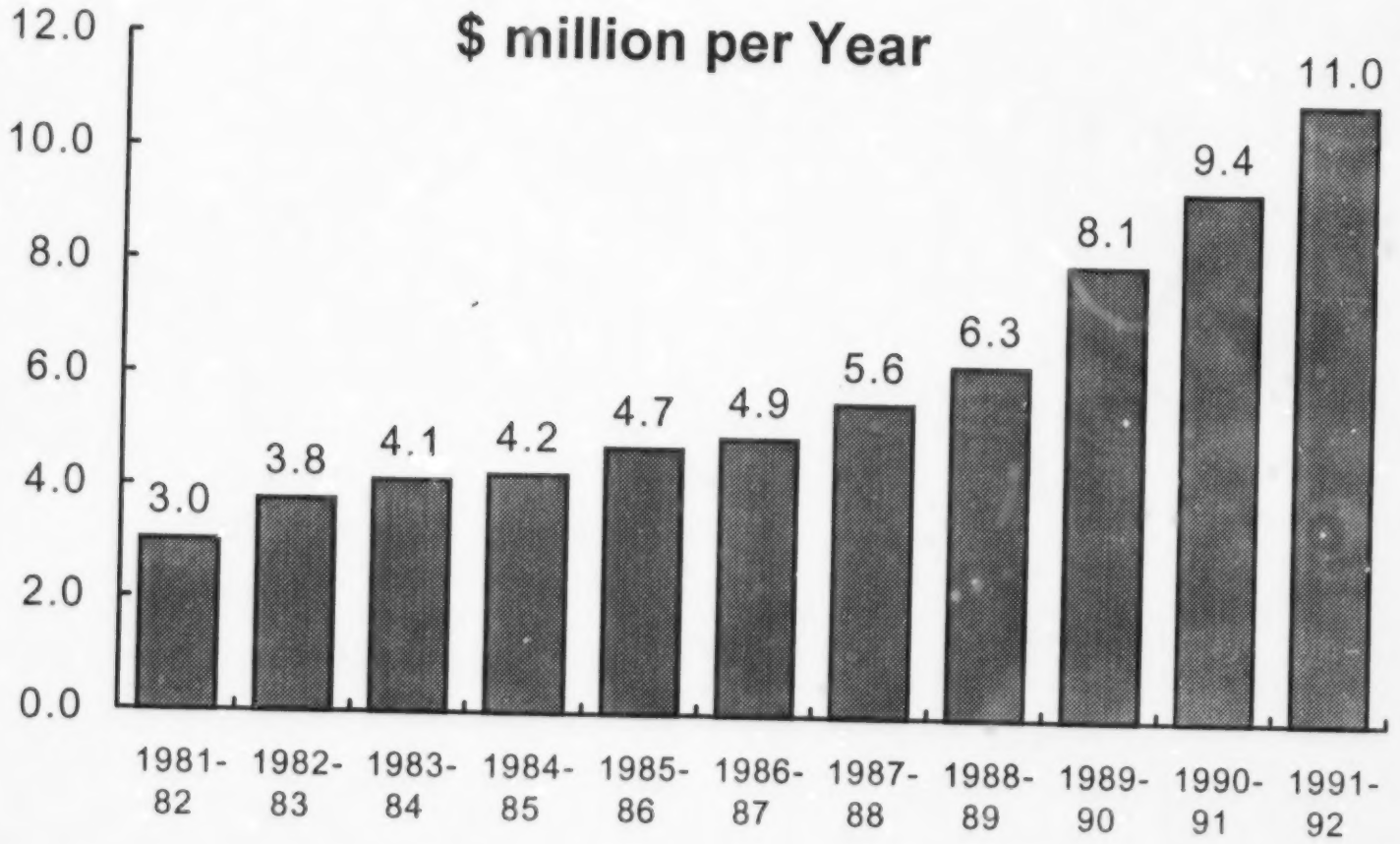
TRENDS AND ISSUES

There are a number of trends and issues that are currently affecting handyDART and other accessible transit services that have to be taken into account in planning future improvements.

One important issue is the cost of service. The current year's handyDART budget of $13.5 million is nearly three times the expenditure of $4.9 million recorded in 1986 and 22 percent greater than the 1991/92 expenditure of $11 million. Service levels and expenditures have been increased each year to keep pace with additional demands for service. Ridership also increases substantially each year as a result of factors such as the growing seniors population, deinstitutionalization, and general population growth in the Vancouver region.

The additional demand for service also affects telephone system usage in the handyDART offices. Complaints frequently result when many people try to book service at the same time. To try to deal with this problem, BC Transit and the Transportation Development Centre of Transport Canada have developed computer software called HandyLine which is being tested at Pacific Transit Cooperative's office in the City of Vancouver. It uses touch-tone telephone technology to give passengers an alternative method of obtaining information automatically, confirming or cancelling a previously booked trip, or leaving a voice message to request a trip booking. If the project proves successful and popular with users, it may be used in other handyDART offices in the Vancouver region.

Vancouver Region
Annual handyDART Expenditures



BC Transit is also trying to improve the operating efficiencies of handyDART offices by installing up-to-date computer hardware. Seven of the nine regional handyDART offices now have computers which are essential for client registration and trip bookings. BC Transit is looking at the range of available scheduling software to see if new programs are available that can improve efficiencies and allow more trips to be booked within the same number of service hours.

In spite of these continuing improvements, handyDART still cannot meet all demands for service, and there are unmet trip requests that result in passenger complaints. Because not all trips can be accommodated, a trip priority system is in operation and trips must to be booked at least two days in advance. Medical, work, and post-secondary education trips are given first priority, and all other trips are given second priority. It has been suggested that these trip priorities are no longer appropriate and should be eliminated.

With all levels of government looking closely at how much money is required for public services, BC Transit has to review how to budget for handyDART and other accessible services in future years. Taxi Savers and accessible buses provide a cost effective alternative to handyDART services.

It was estimated in the Proposed Implementation Strategy for Lift-Equipped Buses in the Vancouver Region that when the buses are fully accessible approximately 20 percent of all public transit trips by persons with disabilities would be diverted to accessible buses and 80 percent would continue to use handyDART. COMPACT suggested that this 20 percent figure was too low and it may be, but we won't be able to confirm the real percentages for many years. Currently a far lower number of trips are diverted; less than one percent of all passengers with disabilities now use accessible buses. If you have ideas about ways that BC Transit can encourage greater use of accessible buses in the future, your suggestions would be appreciated.

There are several methods currently in place to encourage the use of accessible buses. The HandyPass provides concession fares and free travel for an attendant who travels with the passenger. Passengers are eligible for the HandyPass if they are eligible for handyDART or are registered to use handyDART. About 3,700 HandyPasses have been issued to date.

BC Transit's training department offers accessible bus demonstrations to familiarize passengers with accessible buses. A new program provides a Ride Guide volunteer who will teach a new passenger individually about using accessible buses and will travel with the passenger the first few times until the new rider feels comfortable. BC Transit also provides guest speakers to explain to community groups and potential riders how to use accessible transit services. Finally, there are newspaper campaigns to let passengers with disabilities know when new routes go into service, and a Rider's Guide booklet is also available. The Rider's Guide provides much information about using lift-equipped buses, including a map of all the accessible routes. This map is updated each year to incorporate all current In Service accessible routes.

The handyDART operators try to coordinate trips with accessible service, especially when a passenger is travelling from one municipality to another. For example, handyDART may transport the passenger to a Skytrain station, and from there the passenger can transfer to SkyTrain or an accessible bus. BC Transit will be taking the issue of fare integration to the public later this year. Fare integration means that FareSavers and other modes of payment used on conventional transit would also be used on handyDART. This would eliminate the need for handyDART tickets. The use of the same fares would simplify matters when transfers are made between handyDART and accessible transit. It has also been suggested that Ministry of Social Services bus passes be accepted for trips on handyDART.

POLICY AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Following the public meetings in 1989 on all aspects of urban transit for people with disabilities, the Task Force submitted its recommendations to the Board of Directors. The Board subsequently adopted the following policy in mid-1989:

> "BC Transit's policy will be to provide a framework for Transit Commissions and municipalities enabling them to offer integrated multi-modal transit systems for disabled persons. To that end BC Transit will:

1. Acquire conventional transit vehicles with features which enhance their accessibility for the ambulatory. All vehicles will be constructed such that they may be made wheelchair accessible.

2. Develop training programs for operators of transit services to enhance their ability to deal with the needs of disabled passengers.

3. Based on the request of a Transit Commission or local municipality, BC Transit will plan and fund handyDART services, taxi supplement, taxi scrip, and accessible fixed route services.

4. Based on the request of a Transit Commission or municipality and a mutually acceptable implementation plan, BC Transit will acquire conventional transit vehicles which are wheelchair accessible.

These activities will be carried out in accordance with the cost-sharing regulations of the BC Transit Act and the budget authority approved annually by the Provincial Government."

This policy established the current multi-modal approach to transportation services for people with disabilities in the Vancouver region. Taxi Savers and accessible buses are cost effective additions to the services provided by BC Transit and, with handyDART, increase the options available for passengers.

All new conventional transit buses purchased in the Vancouver region will be wheelchair accessible. By the end of 1992, 30 percent of the regional bus fleet will be accessible. At that time, 68 routes or nearly 40 percent of the 176 bus routes in the region will be providing some accessible service. No retrofitting of lifts onto existing vehicles will occur, but at the proposed rate of replacement, all buses will be wheelchair accessible by the year 2006.

To ensure that routes are chosen that will be well utilized, the following criteria are considered when deciding where to introduce accessible service: community coverage, activity centre coverage, access to rapid transit, high ridership, maximum hours of service, route stability, connecting routes and scheduling considerations.

When a route is chosen to be accessible, not all bus trips on the route are accessible. At a minimum, 25 percent of all bus trips on routes with headways of less than 15 minutes provide accessible service. On routes with headways between 15 and 60 minutes, 50 percent of all bus trips provide accessible service. These service parameters were established in consultation with COMPACT to offer some accessible service on many routes throughout the region rather than making only a few routes accessible at all times. Perhaps we should now be thinking of increasing the frequency of In Service accessible buses on some of these accessible routes.

Another aspect of the multi-modal approach to transportation for people with disabilities is the Taxi Saver program. There are 70 accessible taxis (out of a total of 1150 taxis) in the Vancouver region. BC Transit subsidizes the cost of taxi fares for people who have a HandyPass by selling them Taxi Saver coupons at half-price. Passengers can then request trips at any time from a taxi company of their choice without having to pre-book as they do when using handyDART. During the first year of operation, the average total cost per Taxi Saver trip was $7.50. At the present time there are 3,700 persons with disabilities who have HandyPasses and can participate in the Taxi Saver program. About 4,000 passenger trips per month are being provided. Enrollment in the program and the number of trips both continue to increase each month.

Taxi Savers and accessible transit are cost effective approaches to the provision of transit services for people with disabilities. The total cost of a handyDART trip is $15, for accessible service it is $3.30, and with Taxi Savers the trip cost is $7.50. The user fare is $1.25 for handyDART, $0.70 for accessible transit, and $3.75 for a Taxi Saver trip. Consequently, taxpayers contribute 92 percent of the cost of handyDART, 79 percent on accessible buses, and 50 percent for Taxi Saver trips.

When the Task Force held its public meetings in 1989, another suggested alternative was Service Routes or a Community Bus service. Community Bus operations began in Sweden and have recently been established in Alberta and Ontario. They have received favourable reviews and are being considered as an option by BC Transit. The Community Bus concept is a fixed-route bus service which uses small accessible buses designed to meet the needs of the elderly and riders with disabilities.

Who Pays?

Service Type	Total Trip Cost	User Fare	Taxpayers Contribute
handyDART	$15.00	$1.25	$13.75
Accessible Transit	$3.30	$0.70	$2.60
Taxi Savers	$7.50	$3.75	$3.75

The ELF may prove to be a suitable vehicle for this type of service. A Community Bus route could link seniors residences, groups homes, medical centres, retail facilities and recreation areas and provide one round trip per hour. Drivers would offer passenger assistance on a more personalized basis than can be provided by conventional bus drivers. A route that serves popular origins and destinations will be well used and will therefore carry more passengers per hour than can normally be transported by handyDART.

Another innovative approach in Victoria and Ontario is the low floor transit bus. Low floor buses represent a new technology that makes it easier for persons with mobility impairments to board and leave a transit vehicle. A low floor bus has a step at the front that is only 14 inches above the ground. A small ramp can be lowered to make the step much easier to navigate and reduce the time required to board a person with a disability. Victoria is one of the first transit properties in Canada to use this technology in conventional service. Ontario has approved a low-floor bus policy to follow this lead. There are no current plans to buy low-floor transit buses for use in the Vancouver region, but experience with these vehicles in Victoria will be closely monitored.

Finally, BC Transit must consider the future for handyDART services. handyDART has seen its costs triple since 1986, with a current budget of about $13.5 million compared with an expenditure in 1986 of only $4.9 million. It is expected that the increasing demand for handyDART will moderate because of the increasing number of accessible bus routes and the greater use of Taxi Savers, but many people will continue to prefer handyDART.

MAKE YOUR VIEWS KNOWN

In order to plan and coordinate future services, BC Transit needs to know what users think about their transit needs and the quality of services being provided. Questions which we need to address are:

- Should we consider a centralized brokerage system for booking, scheduling, and dispatching handyDART trips (as is done in Edmonton)?

- Is increased use of taxis desirable?

- **Are low-floor buses preferable to wheelchair lift-equipped vehicles for regular fixed route service?**

- **Should a portion of the total transit budget be dedicated to handyDART and similar services?**

- **If funds are available for increases in handyDART service levels, how should they be allocated - more daytime service or more weekend and evening service?**

- **Do you favour more bus lanes and bus priority measures for a faster more comfortable ride on accessible buses?**

- **Do you have comments about handyDART vehicle design, comfort, and convenience?**

- **Do we need to review and perhaps revise eligibility guidelines for handyDART?**

- **What about trip priorities on handyDART?**

- **If the MSS bus pass is made valid on handyDART, will people who are not eligible for this pass experience more difficulty in booking trips?**

- **Should we attempt to provide some on-demand handyDART service?**

- **Do you agree with the concept of fare integration?**

- **Is it worthwhile to initiate fixed route Community Bus service on a trial basis?**

Presentations by people with disabilities and others at the public meetings will provide input into the planning of accessible services. Comments and information from people who attend the public meetings will be incorporated in the development of a 1993/94 service plan and budget for accessible transit services in the Vancouver region. Should you require any additional information, please call Debbie Krentz, Accessible Transit Planner, at 264-5000, local 5138.